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ABSTRACT

This study used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (comprised of three subsamples taken in 1979) to characterize the siblings of middle class and poor Blacks and Whites, testing for racial differences in the probability of having a sibling on the other side of the socioeconomic divide. In support of theories in the urban poverty literature about the social isolation of poor blacks, results found that African Americans were less likely than Whites to have siblings who crossed social lines in ways that were beneficial. Low-income African Americans were less likely to have a middle class sibling than were low-income Whites, and middle class African Americans were more likely than middle class Whites to have a low-income sibling. Therefore, low-income African Americans were less likely to have a sibling to turn to for help but more likely to have a sibling to turn to them for assistance if they were middle class. The study results suggest that racial differences in the composition of kin networks may indicate another dimension of racial stratification. (Contains 43 references.) (SM)

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Crossing Class Boundaries: Race, Siblings and Socioeconomic Heterogeneity*

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"Crossing Class Boundaries: Race, Siblings and Socioeconomic Heterogeneity"

ABSTRACT

We use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to characterize siblings of middle class and poor blacks and whites, testing for racial differences in the probability of having a sibling on the other side of the socioeconomic divide. In support of theories in the urban poverty literature about the social isolation of poor blacks, we find that poor African-Americans are less likely to have a middle class sibling than poor whites, controlling for individual and family background factors. For the middle class, being black is positively correlated with the probability of having a poor sibling, challenging the notion that the black middle class is separated from the black poor, but supporting recent research on black middle class fragility. Overall, we find that African-Americans are less likely than whites to have siblings that cross important social class lines in ways that are beneficial. Racial differences in the composition of kin networks may indicate another dimension of racial stratification.

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"Crossing Class Boundaries: Race, Siblings and Socioeconomic Heterogeneity"

Stratification studies focus on the attainment and mobility of individuals, taking into consideration their achieved and ascribed characteristics as well as the influence of their family of origin. Socioeconomic status is conceptualized as a trait of the individual, or perhaps of a husband and wife dyad, and the result of investments in various forms of capital made by the individual. In this article, we propose a broader understanding of socioeconomic well-being that recognizes that individuals are embedded within not only the nuclear family of their own creation, but also within the family in which they were born. Siblings and parents remain an important reference group and a common source of support and/or stress. Thus, this article focuses on "kin attainment," locates individual attainment within a discussion of the extended family, and then theorizes about the importance of kin attainment for our understanding of racial stratification. While outsiders may gauge success or failure on individualized criteria, a particular social status position is experienced by an individual as a combination of 1) the fruits of his/her own labor and investments, and 2) the successes or failures of significant others surrounding the individual.

We apply this framework to the topic of racial stratification. Even by standard stratification measures that focus on the individual, it is clear that racial equality remains illusive in the U.S. African Americans have lower incomes, receive less education, achieve lower occupational status, and possess less wealth than whites. Do these racial disadvantages extend to the arena of kin attainment? Are the racial disadvantages documented at the individual level just one part of the stratification story? Are they compounded by racial differences in connections to disadvantaged kin? We use data on siblings to empirically address these questions, focusing on low-income and middle-income blacks and whites and the relative extent of sibling ties across these socioeconomic categories. We bring together the literatures on intergenerational processes and social networks/social capital to build a theory of family attainment that suggests the existence of an unrecognized layer of inequality by race.

INTERGENERATIONAL PROCESSES AND SIBLING STUDIES

Previous research on sibling outcomes has focused on the correlation in sibling earnings and is motivated by an interest in the intergenerational mobility, and especially the transmission of poverty, across generations (Duncan, 1969; Corcoran et al. 1992). Research using siblings is ideal for this question because measured and unmeasured characteristics related to family and community culture, and even shared genetic traits such as in studies using monozygotic twins, can be assumed to be shared across siblings. If family and community background characteristics are significant determinants of socioeconomic status, siblings will share a strong resemblance in their status; if family and community background characteristics are unimportant, siblings' outcomes will be no more correlated than with unrelated others (Solon, forthcoming).

Longitudinal estimates of the correlation in brothers' earnings vary depending on the outcome variable (hourly wage, annual earnings, total income), the data used (the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, National Longitudinal Survey) and the time period of analysis (Ashenfelter and Zimmerman, 1997; Solon, Corcoran, Gordon, and Laren, 1991; Solon, 1998). In general, however, estimates fall around 0.4. This means that 40 percent

of permanent earnings inequality is attributable to variation in family and community background and that 60 percent is due to factors not shared by brothers (Solon, forthcoming). Correlation estimates for sister-sister comparisons in annual earnings are similar to those of brother-brother comparison, but the sister-brother correlation appears to be smaller, presumably due to differences in labor force participation rates (Altonji and Dunn, 1991; Bound, Griliches, and Hall, 1986; Solon, Corcoran, Gordon and Laren, 1991).

This literature, largely located in economics, focuses on the correlation in income generally—without respect to particular class lines that might have specific social meaning. To say that siblings' incomes are moderately correlated, on average, does not indicate how siblings experience that correlation in earnings. There are specific social class categories – poor, middle class, upper class – that have meaning and represent particular life experiences, opportunities, and barriers. Having a sibling in a different class category may be more acutely relevant to ones own mobility chances (upward or downward) or quality of life than having a sibling in similar socioeconomic circumstances. Recently, Goldstein and Warren (2000) studied the kin networks of blacks and whites, including a much wider set of kin than siblings (e.g., parents, spouse(s), children, an aunt or uncle, etc). They find that whites have slightly higher levels of kin diversity in occupations than blacks, but there seem to be no race differences for educational diversity among family members. However, the authors' measure of kin heterogeneity does not include "ego". That is, the authors measure how different a focal individual's ("ego's") relatives are *from each other*, rather than how different kin are from ego.

Thus, we add to the existing literature on intergenerational processes and sibling outcomes in two ways. First, we extend the tradition of studies of sibling status correlations by slightly revising the question. Instead of asking "How *similar* are siblings and thus what is the importance for individual attainment of unmeasured family background and community characteristics," our queries are 1) how *different* are siblings, and 2) are family contexts different for blacks and whites? Establishing the correlation in siblings' incomes or occupations tells us important things about the effect of the previous generation, but stops short of characterizing contemporary ties across class boundaries. Second, our study adds to the work of Goldstein and Warren by examining racial differences in having siblings on *opposite sides of a class divide*. Our focus is on sibling characteristics relative to ego as a way to a broader understanding of ego's own socioeconomic stability, rather than the diversity of kin excluding ego. We also test for what family background characteristics lead to class heterogeneity among siblings. We theorize about the effects of such heterogeneity on racial inequality by connecting this study to the literatures on black middle class fragility and the social isolation of the black urban poor.

BLACK MIDDLE CLASS FRAGILITY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION OF THE BLACK POOR

In *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), William Julius Wilson argued that the African American community was splitting in two, with middle-class blacks improving their position relative to whites, and poor blacks becoming ever more

marginalized. Wilson's relatively optimistic prognosis for the black middle class, a thesis based on the gains made in the 1950s and 1960s, was undercut by the economic crises of the mid-1970s. Studies in the 1970s found that, as Wilson had posited, class background for African Americans was becoming more important in determining occupational status than race (Featherman and Hauser 1976; Hout 1984). These trends did not extend into the 1980s, however, when racial differences in the ability to pass on one's privileged class status, or improve the position of one's children, became more pronounced. Downward mobility--across generations and within one's lifetime--was also more prevalent among African Americans (Davis 1995; Duncan, Smeeding, and Rogers 1993; Gittleman and Joyce 1999; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Moreover, the steady and large increases in the percentage of blacks in white-collar occupations observed in the post-War and civil rights eras waned after the mid-1970s (Landry 1987). In income, the gap between what whites earn and what African Americans earn has not shown signs of narrowing since the early 1970s (Smith and Welch 1989), and for younger workers the gap may have increased (Cancio, Evans, and Maume 1996). These occupational and economic indicators illustrate a continuing fragility among the black middle class when compared to whites.

Qualitative research on the black middle class has further documented this fragility within the family and community contexts. Pattillo-McCoy reports considerable social class and lifestyle diversity within Groveland, a black middle class neighborhood in Chicago. This neighborhood level class heterogeneity was mirrored in the families that resided in Groveland. Alongside the personal success of any one family member, there were extended family members (and friends and neighbors as well) who continued to struggle. Recognizing these relationships that crossed socioeconomic lines, one Groveland resident made forecasts about the strain that recent welfare reforms would put on middle class African Americans. "Just think about the welfare reform," she instructed. "Just think about your family. Those people that are gonna be hurt by it, they're gonna come to their family first for support. And you're trying to support your family. And how much support can you give? So I think that people're gonna have to wake up to that. Black people especially." (Also see Edin & Lein 1997 for the importance of kin support).

In stating that middle class African Americans need to be especially concerned about policies that affect the poor, this resident makes a basic assumption that their family members are more likely to be economically needy than the family members of middle class whites. This is the area of black middle class fragility that we investigate in this article by testing the hypothesis of greater family heterogeneity (and thus obligations) among blacks than whites using a nationally representative sample of black and white individuals and their siblings.

We also investigate the extended families of poor blacks and whites to determine if poor blacks relative to poor whites are isolated in poor families, as suggested in the literature on poverty and race. The urban poverty literature emphasizes the isolation of poor blacks, due in part to the out-migration of the black middle class (Jargowsky 1997; Wilson 1987). The social networks of poor African Americans differ from nonpoor African Americans and whites on multiple dimensions. Studies find that poor blacks name fewer people in their network; are less likely to have another adult in the household; know fewer employed persons; know fewer college-educated persons; and

have fewer friends with whom they can discuss important issues or call on for help (Fernandez and Harris 1992; Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998). There is also some evidence of exacerbating effects of neighborhood poverty on social isolation. When contrasting social ties between residents of high and low poverty neighborhoods, Wacquant and Wilson (1989) find that residents of extreme poverty areas have fewer social ties and that the ties they do have tend to be with individuals of lower class status.

While this literature frequently focuses empirically on neighborhood-based segregation and isolation, discussions of the marginalization of the poor from role models, job networks, and myriad forms of productive capital suggest generalized class segregation, especially among African Americans. We argue that such discussions do not consider possible connections between middle class and poor African Americans in families, but instead imply that the black middle class must constitute a separate set of families from the black poor, with little interaction between the two. Although we cannot explicitly test the theory of no contact between the two groups, we can determine if they share family relationships.

For our purposes, the social isolation thesis suggests two hypotheses. First, the high degree of class segregation among African American families as suggested by urban poverty research would translate into fewer poor siblings of middle class blacks than should be expected if family members were randomly distributed on the socioeconomic spectrum. That is, middle class blacks should resemble middle class whites in their sibling constellations. As a result, being black should not significantly predict having a poor sibling in our analysis of middle class blacks and whites. This, of course, contradicts the hypothesis generated from the literature on black middle class fragility and extended families (discussed further below), and thus we aim to empirically reconcile these two competing expectations. For poor blacks and whites, the hypothesis is more straightforward. Social isolation implies that being black should have a negative effect on having a middle class sibling.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILIAL SOCIOECONOMIC HETEROGENEITY

Our interest in examining racial differences in cross-class ties is driven by the very real potential consequences of those familial ties. Specifically, the dispersion of sibling outcomes across class lines matters in three ways. First, having a sibling of a different class status represents a possible source of financial help or strain. Generally, a poor sibling requires more extensive help-giving by family members and is much less likely to be able to provide support for another family member in periods of economic stress. This has special relevance for African-Americans since 32 percent of all African-Americans experienced at least one material hardship in 1995 compared to 17 percent of whites (Bauman, 1995). Furthermore, having a poor sibling is associated with deleterious financial outcomes for nonpoor siblings: In previous research (authors, forthcoming), we find that nonpoor siblings are less likely to have a bank account or own a home if they have poor siblings than if they do not.[1]

Second, kin can matter because of the presence or absence of certain forms of capital. A poor sibling is less likely to be able to provide job or educational contacts for their sisters and brothers, or nieces and nephews, or impart important cultural capital. On the other hand, for poor individuals, a higher status might represent necessary job

information, influence, or contacts (Lin, Ensel and Vaughn, 1981). Goldstein and Warren (2000) find that kin heterogeneity is positively related to an individual's feelings of financial security, and that this relationship operates through the "instrumental effects of network heterogeneity in providing additional social resources" (p. 402). Thus, general racial differences in sibling ties across class boundaries suggest racial differences in reference groups for poor or middle class individuals, and differences in the stock of family resources that an individual may access.

Finally, kin can matter because of the psychological strain or boost that family members represent. Even if middle class families do not provide financial help to their poor family members, there can still be feelings of obligation or guilt as a result of that contact. For example, McAdoo (1978) reports that 92 percent of her middle class African American sample felt obligated to help a less fortunate relative. Higginbotham and Weber (1992) studied black and white professional women in Memphis and found that middle class African American women were significantly more likely than white women to feel that they owed their kin for their success. In fact, many of the white women in the study were "perplexed and asked what the question meant" when queried about owing their family. These studies indicate that upward mobility for African Americans does not sever the ties with other family members, and that there are considerable feelings of obligation. As with the social and/or cultural capital discussed above, for lower income individuals, being connected to middle class siblings could be a psychological boost by broadening aspirations and creating efficacious expectations.

Furthermore, this analysis has important implications for scholars of racial stratification. Racial differences in access to and the strains of siblings of different class status may indicate another dimension along which African-Americans are at a disadvantage. Despite early claims of black middle class snobbery (Frazier 1957), many middle class African Americans remain connected to poor blacks at the community level, in neighborhoods and institutions, as well as politically and culturally (Billingsley 1992; Hochschild 1995; Kronus 1971; Massey, Condran, & Denton 1989). This enduring "familiarity" with poverty differentiates the white and black middle classes, and perhaps contributes to the fragility of the former. In general, we argue that the respective family contexts in which blacks and whites are embedded have ramifications for their stability and well-being.

DATA

We use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). The NLSY is comprised of three subsamples taken in 1978: 1) a cross-sectional sample of youth between the ages of 14 and 21; 2) an oversample of civilian Hispanic, black, and economically disadvantaged whites between the ages of 14 and 21; and 3) a sample of youth enlisted in the four branches of the military between the ages of 17 and 21. The 12,686 civilian and military respondents interviewed in 1979 originated from 8,770 unique households, with 2,862 households including multiple respondents. The NLSY panel consists of all members of a sample household within the age range in 1978.[2] We use the 1998 survey wave, when respondents were between the ages of 33 and 41. The NLSY sample remains comparable to the national population in that age range (Zagorsky 1999)

The NLSY is particularly well-suited to answer our questions because it contains sibling data that are necessary for understanding kin networks and, therefore, is the dataset of choice for other researchers of family-level outcomes (Geronimus, 1992, 1994; Sandefur and Wells, 1999).[3] The large sample size and high retention rate (87 percent as of 1998) minimize the bias from differential attrition by race and income (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). The primary weakness of these data is that we are limited to siblings because information on parents is available only for the initial survey year. Hence, we can only examine kin of the same generation, losing possible stressors (advantages) that might exist for sample members with a poor (middle class) parent.

SAMPLES

We use NLSY sample members who self identified their first or only racial/ethnic as non-Hispanic in 1979. Those who identified as "black" are coded as African-American; all other respondents are coded as white. Also, because we aim to characterize the composition of sibling networks, our samples only include NLSY respondents with siblings. By definition, singletons are not in the population at risk for having siblings of another social class and, therefore, are not relevant to this analysis. Finally, because there may be more than one sample sibling in a family, we statistically adjust for the clustering of observations by families in the multivariate analyses.[4]

Following Duncan, Smeeding, and Rogers (1993), we use an income-based definition of class, which provides mutually exclusive categories of middle class and low-income. Defining someone as middle class based on their occupation or education does not rule out the possibility that they are low-income. To capture permanent rather than transitory income, which Solon et al. (1991) have demonstrated provides the most stable measure of the correlation in sibling income, we average income-to-needs ratios (total family income divided by the federal poverty level adjusted for family size) for eight year period from 1989 to 1997 using survey data from 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, and 1998. Following the lead of Solon et al (1991), Corcoran et al. (1992) and Solon (forthcoming), we begin calculating permanent income when all sample members are age 25 and above to avoid the volatility of income at young ages and throughout periods of college enrollment. Persons living in families with a mean income-to-needs ratio less than 1.85 are considered "low-income"; those with a mean income-to-needs ratio greater than 1.85 but less than 6 are considered "middle class".

Choosing a cut-off between low-income and middle class is somewhat arbitrary. The official US Census poverty threshold has long been criticized as being too low (Beverly, 2000; Citro and Michael, 1995). Reports of material hardship are not limited to those meeting the official federal definition of poverty. Research by Beverly (2000) indicates that over twenty percent of the working poor report experiencing material hardship. We choose the level of 1.85 times the poverty threshold as households at this level and below qualify for a number of means-tested benefits, such as Medicaid and food stamps. Other specifications did not alter our findings and we discuss them briefly below.

METHODS

We explore correlates of having a low-income sibling given that the respondent is

middle class by estimating equation (1) which expresses the probability of having a low-income sibling as a function of race, demographic measures, individual level and family level characteristics. We then repeat this analysis and estimate the probability of having a middle class sibling given that the respondent is low-income with the same equation (1).

$$(1) \qquad P_i = a + bR_i + cD_i + dZ_i + gF_i + e_i$$

P_i = 1 if any sibling of the middle class (low-income) member is classified as low-income (middle class) based on their average 8 year income-to-needs ratio, 0 otherwise

We use a dummy variable for race (RACE: 1=black, 0=otherwise) and expect the coefficient to be *positive* in the middle class sample because of the higher overall poverty rate among African Americans. For the low-income sample, the research on poverty and race posits that low-income African Americans are less likely to have connections to nonpoor network members than low-income whites; thus, we expect a *negative* relationship between race and the probability of having a middle class sibling among the low-income.

We control for basic demographic measures (D), including the natural log of the eight-year average income-to-needs ratio for the sample member, and their number of siblings. We expect that the income-to-needs ratio will be negatively related to sibling class status for middle class sample members and positively related to sibling class status for low-income sample members. Having more siblings in the NLSY should increase the probability of having a sibling on the other side of the class divide for both groups simply through increased exposure to siblings. However, since not all siblings are included in the sample, we also include a variable indicating the total number of siblings in the family in 1979.

We also add other individual-level controls (Z). We include age (and age-squared) for the sample member because incomes increase with age. Thus, age should be positively correlated with the having a middle class sibling for the low-income sample, and negatively correlated with having a low-income sibling for the middle class sample. Education is included to control for other forms of advantage that might be correlated with sibling outcomes.

Finally, we add family background controls (F), including a dummy variable for whether the person was poor in 1978 (the first year of the sample when the sample member was a teenager), and a dummy variable indicating whether their mother had a high school education or higher in 1979. We originally examined both father's and mother's education and occupational status but found them all to be highly correlated. Therefore, we interpret the result for mother's education level to represent the full range of parental differences correlated with mother's education (Kalmijn 1994). Because siblings share these family background characteristic, they should be strong in predicting sibling outcomes. The lasting effects of growing up poor (Corcoran 1995; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997) suggest that poverty in 1978 should have a strong positive effect for middle class sample members and no effect or a negative effect for low-income sample

members, while mother's education will have a negative (positive) effect for middle class (low-income) sample members.

Tables 1 and 2 present descriptive statistics. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the low-income sample, and Table 2 presents the same data for the middle income sample. Both tables provide information on the full samples as well as by race in order to address our interests in the race-specific experiences of these socioeconomic locations. Racial disparities exist within the low-income and middle class samples as well. African-Americans have more siblings in their family of origin and in the NLSY sample, which should increase their probability of having a sibling across class boundaries. In the low-income sample, blacks are poorer than whites (i.e., have a lower income-to-needs ratio), and among the middle income blacks are less middle class than whites. Over one-half of poor blacks grew up in a poor household, more than three times the percentage of poor whites. This pattern holds among middle income blacks and whites where middle income blacks are over four times as likely to have grown up poor.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

Our dependent variable for each sample is the connection to a sibling across the class boundary. Among the low-income sample, blacks are significantly *less* likely to have a middle class sibling than poor whites. While this bivariate analysis offers preliminary support for the social isolation hypothesis, still one-half of poor blacks have at least one sibling who is middle income, indicating that such theories may hold only for a subset of the black poor population. Among the middle class, African-Americans are significantly *more* likely to have a poor sibling, illustrating the particular family strains present for over 40 percent of middle class blacks compared to only one 16 percent of middle class whites. We explore these findings further using multivariate analysis.

The Social Isolation of the Low-Income

Table 3 presents logistic regression results predicting having any middle class siblings for low-income sample members. Being African-American significantly reduces a poor person's odds of having a middle class sibling: low-income African-Americans are half as likely as low-income whites to have a middle class sibling, after controlling for demographic, individual and family-level characteristics. The natural log of the average income-to-needs ratio of the sample member and the number of siblings in the family in 1979 are not significant. However, as expected, the number of siblings in the NLSY sample is associated with increased odds of having a middle class sibling. Age is unrelated to the probability of having a middle class sibling. This is not completely unexpected given the compressed age distribution of the sample and the permanent income measure used. Having some college education and having completed college is associated with increased odds of having a middle class sibling compared to those without a high school diploma. Finally, having lived in a family that was classified as below the poverty threshold in 1979 significantly decreases the odds of having a middle class sibling for all low-income sample members. Mother's education has no effect.

Thus, among the poor, being African-American substantially decreases the odds of having a middle class sibling to call upon, after controlling for their own characteristics.

Table 3 about here

Further analyses (not shown) tested the sensitivity of these results to the income-to-needs threshold used to define the sample member as low-income. Analyses using income-to-needs ratios of 2 as the threshold between middle income and low income yielded similar results to those presented here. We also tested a model in which we used the official definition of poverty as having an income below the poverty line, and middle class as income-to-needs ratio greater than two. We could only perform this analysis using income from two survey years (rather than eight) in order to preserve an adequate sample size. Only 331 respondents in the NLSY, reduced further by missing data, had average incomes below the poverty line over an eight-year observation period. This formulation leaves out the marginal families between 1 and 2 times the poverty line, and represents a greater socioeconomic divide between siblings. Again, the results supported those presented in Table 3, with poor blacks being half as likely as whites to have a middle class sibling, controlling for demographic and family background characteristics. These findings confirm the hypothesis that low-income African-Americans are more isolated in low-income families than are low-income whites.

Middle Class Connections to the Low-Income

In Table 4, we present logistic regression results predicting having any low-income sibling for middle class sample members. Results here show the converse of the former analysis: stable middle class African-Americans are much more likely to have a low-income sibling than are stable middle class whites. Among the other demographic characteristics considered, family financial security (i.e., the log of income-to-needs) is negatively related to having a poor sibling, while the number of siblings, both in the family in 1979 and in the NLSY sample, is positively related. Among controls for age and education level, only having completed four years or more of college significantly reduces the odds of having a poor sibling, while age is unrelated to the odds of having a poor sibling. Finally, among kin characteristics we find that being poor in 1979 increases the odds of having a low-income sibling, while increased years of mother's education reduces the odds.

Table 4 about here

In further analyses (not shown), we ran the same the models on a sample of middle income respondents whose average income-to-needs ratio was above 1.85 (as in Table 4), but this time including high income respondents defined as those with income-to-needs ratios greater than 6. Results were similar to those presented here, if not stronger. There was one exception: the coefficient for age-squared was positive and significant, indicating that the age of a sample member was associated with an increased odds of having a poor sibling at a declining rate. The variable of interest, being African-American, was even more strongly associated with having a poor sibling.

In another sensitivity test (corresponding to the one described in the section on the low-income sample) we tested a model in which we used the official definition of poverty as having an income below the poverty line, and middle class as income-to-needs ratio greater than two. Again, this formulation leaves out the marginal families (near poor and fragile middle class) and represents a greater socioeconomic divide between siblings. Supporting our original finding in Table 4 middle class blacks significantly more likely to have a poor sibling (this time, one officially below the poverty line) than middle class whites.

CONCLUSION

Building on the research on the correlation of siblings income, we find that African-Americans are less likely than whites to have siblings that cross important social lines in ways that are beneficial. Low-income African-Americans are less likely to have a middle class sibling than are low-income whites; and middle class African-Americans are more likely than middle class whites to have a low-income sibling. Stated another way, low-income African-Americans are less likely to have a sibling to turn to for help but more likely to have a sibling turn to them for assistance if they are middle class. Existing research on disparities within the middle class shows that African Americans are at higher risk for downward mobility and the prospects for surviving either personal or national economic crises are more bleak (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Adding family-level disparities to the documented income, occupational, residential, and wealth inequalities illustrates the continuing importance of race across the class spectrum.

This paper advances two theoretical positions. First, these findings support the need to examine social stratification from a perspective that looks beyond individual achievement to include important social networks in which individuals are embedded, such as the families of origin. Network analysis, status attainment, and urban poverty research are a few areas that already conceptualize individuals as connected to significant others, but in abstracting from that research, the attention often reverts to the individual. "Ego" in network studies, "sons" in status attainment models, or the poor person who has no contacts to employed neighbors in urban poverty research are the ultimate unit of analysis. While our data necessitate that we too begin with an individual and create their web of siblings and parents, the conclusions we draw emphasize *group-based* disadvantage, rather than individual differences. That is, our argument is that "poverty" and "middle classness" is different for blacks and whites, even beyond the fact that more blacks are poor and fewer blacks are middle class. The experience of a similar socioeconomic location differs for blacks and whites in that the familial reference group for blacks is more disadvantaged than that for whites. Studies that focus solely on the individual will tend to under-estimate the extent of racial stratification in our society by missing these cross-class connections that characterize groups.

Second, our research empirically addresses the debates about class structure within the black community. Compared to whites, it is clear that poor blacks are more socially isolated and middle class blacks are embedded in more fragile families. Yet for those interested specifically in black families and the black community, the *absolute* levels of homogeneity or heterogeneity in familial networks are more relevant. There,

our conclusions are open for varying interpretations. The fact that half of poor blacks have a sibling on the other side of the class divide poses a challenge to the large literature that depicts poor blacks as separated from the "mainstream." On the other hand, there remains half of poor blacks that within their families have all poor siblings. This is surely a nontrivial segment of the low income black community. Together, these alternate readings highlight the importance of recognizing the diversity of the black experience. The same holds for middle income blacks, 40 percent of whom have a sibling across the class divide, but 60 percent of whom have only other middle income siblings. There are certainly other domains in which these findings may be replicated – neighborhoods, workplaces, race-based organizations, to suggest just a few.

Thus, there are obvious extensions of and elaborations on the present study. The demographic study of neighborhoods has already yielded numerous findings on the class make-up of black and white neighborhoods, but what are the patterns in friends on the job? Or extended families? Or churches? Recent research on the black middle class in particular has suggested that blacks experience much more class diversity in all of these arenas than whites, but many of these studies are based on particular neighborhoods (Jackson forthcoming; Pattillo-McCoy 1999) or a collection of personal histories and anecdotes (Billingsley 1992). There are also ways to extend this research in the stratification field. We offer three possible consequences of familial ties that cross class boundaries—differences in material assistance, social and cultural capital, and psychological well-being. This paper identifies a variable -- cross class ties between siblings -- that may affect other domains of social stratification such as employment, income stability, or subjective feelings of efficacy and achievement..

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Endnotes

[1] Currently, the research is mixed on the question of if African-Americans are more likely to offer tangible support to kin than whites. For example: White and Riedman (1992) use the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and find that blacks are more likely than whites to have contact with their siblings, but less likely to give or receive money. Raley (1995) uses the same data but only for unmarried young adults and similarly finds greater contact with parents and siblings among blacks versus whites, less exchange with any kin among blacks, but more exchange with kin other than parents among blacks. Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Schoeni (1992) finds no racial differences in giving time or money, but whites are more likely to receive time and money transfers from parents (controlling for income and education). However, he is careful to note that his analysis does not include co-residers and that blacks' higher rates of co-residence might offset this white advantage. On this same issue, when Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg (1993, p. 1444) add the group they term "high-exchangers" with the co-residers, they report that "blacks...appear to be equally involved in exchanges of support."

[2] In order to minimize the possibility of systematic differences in home-leaving, the NLSY made special efforts to capture college and non-college youth who were in the age range but who had left home. Multiple respondents from a single household were most often siblings, although other relatives and spouses in the age range were also interviewed. However, a greater proportion of white siblings than black siblings are contained in the NLSY sample. Hence, the results presented here are a lower bound estimate of the percentage of African-Americans with poor siblings.

[3] Other researchers have used the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which has a different sampling problem in that siblings born after 1968 (the first year of the survey) are not included as sample members (Corcoran and Kunz, 1997; Hofman, Foster and Furstenberg, 1993; Solon, Corcoran, Gordon, and Laren, 1991).

[4] We use the clustering subcommand in STATA version 6.0, which specifies that observations be independent across groups but not necessarily independent within groups. This subcommand, used here grouping by families, produces robust standard errors.

Table 1. Variable Means (standard deviations) for Low Income Sample, NLSY 1998[a]

Variable	*Low-Income Sample (n=634)*						
	Full Sample		White		African-American		Sig.
Demographic							
African-American	29.34	(0.46)					
Number of siblings in family in 1979	4.34	(2.54)	3.81	(2.18)	5.63	(2.87)	***
Number of siblings in NLSY Sample	1.56	(0.84)	1.44	(0.80)	1.82	(0.87)	***
Average Income to Needs Ratio 198	1.24	(0.43)	1.30	(0.40)	1.11	(0.46)	***
LN(Average Income to Needs Ratio	0.10	(0.62)	0.17	(0.54)	-0.06	(0.76)	***
Age	36.57	(2.19)	36.48	(2.16)	36.78	(2.25)	
Age squared	1342.02	(161.08)	1335.50	(158.57)	1357.70	(166.39)	
High school graduate	57.74	(0.49)	57.96	(0.49)	57.23	(0.50)	
Some college	17.45	(0.38)	15.85	(0.37)	21.30	(0.41)	
4 Years of college or more	4.60	(0.21)	5.38	(0.23)	2.74	(0.16)	
Family Background							
Poor in 1978	27.62	(0.45)	16.66	(0.37)	54.01	(0.50)	***
Mother's education (in years)	10.74	(2.35)	10.89	(2.33)	10.38	(2.37)	
Dependent variables							
Any poor sibling	N/A						
Any middle class sibling	62.54	(0.48)	65.64	(0.48)	49.78	(0.50)	***

[a] Mean and proportions are weighted using 1998 NLSY weights
*p<.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001 (two-tailed test)

Table 2. Variable Means (standard deviations) for Middle Income Sample, NLSY 1998[a]

Variable	*Middle Class Sample (n=1667)*						
	Full Sample		White		African-American		Sig.
Demographic							
African-American	10.01	(0.30)					
Number of siblings in family in 1979	3.56	(2.05)	3.41	(1.88)	4.97	(2.84)	***
Number of siblings in NLSY Sample	1.55	(0.74)	1.52	(0.71)	1.78	(0.92)	***
Average Income to Needs Ratio 1989	3.56	(1.08)	3.59	(1.08)	3.28	(1.04)	***
LN(Average Income to Needs Ratio 1	1.22	(0.31)	1.23	(0.31)	1.14	(0.31)	***
Age	36.83	(2.25)	36.86	(2.27)	36.63	(2.10)	
Age squared	1361.81	(166.34)	1363.53	(167.54)	1346.63	(154.54)	
High school graduate	43.66	(0.50)	43.88	(0.50)	41.71	(0.49)	
Some college	23.95	(0.43)	23.07	(0.42)	31.92	(0.47)	***
4 Years of college or more	26.58	(0.44)	27.13	(0.44)	21.66	(0.41)	***
Family Background							
Poor in 1978	10.28	(0.30)	7.66	(0.27)	33.90	(0.47)	***
Mother's education (in years)	11.96	(2.29)	12.05	(2.26)	11.13	(2.47)	***
Dependent variables							
Any poor sibling	18.71	(0.39)	16.20	(0.37)	41.30	(0.49)	***
Any middle class sibling	N/A						

[a] Mean and proportions are weighted using 1998 NLSY weights
*p<.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001 (two-tailed test)

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Having Any Middle Class Sibling, Low-Income Sample, NLSY

Variable	*B*	*(SE)*
Demographic		
African-American	-0.8247	(0.2600) **
Number of siblings in family in 1979	-0.0007	(0.0407)
Number of siblings in NLSY Sample	0.6883	(0.2014) ***
LN(Average Income to Needs Ratio)	0.1101	(0.1225)
Age	-1.4147	(1.4459)
Age squared	0.0191	(0.0197)
High school graduate	0.2062	(0.2374)
Some college	0.8125	(0.3297) *
4 Years of college or more	1.9621	(0.7255) **
Family Background		
Poor in 1978	-0.5178	(0.2449) *
Mother's education (in years)	0.0400	(0.0466)
Constant	25.3045	(26.4388)
N	634	
Cox & Snell R-Squared	0.1025	
Chi-square	37.83	
df	11	

*p≤.05, **p≤.01, *** p≤.001 (two-tailed test)

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Having Any Low-Income Sibling, Middle-Income Sample, NLSY

Variable	*B*	*(SE)*
Demographic		
African-American	0.9390	(0.1803) ***
Number of siblings in family in 1979	0.0648	(0.0364)
Number of siblings in NLSY Sample	0.2831	(0.1127) *
LN(Average Income to Needs Ratio)	-1.1082	(0.2222) ***
Age	1.1706	(1.0259)
Age squared	-0.0170	(0.0140)
High school graduate	0.0919	(0.2964)
Some college	-0.2469	(0.3204)
4 Years of college or more	-0.7524	(0.3465) *
Family Background		
Poor in 1978	0.4288	(0.2101) *
Mother's education (in years)	-0.0759	(0.0353) *
Constant	-19.9284	(18.6857)
N	1667	
Cox & Snell R-Squared	0.146	
Chi-square	156.03	
df	11	

*p≤.05, **p≤.01, *** p≤.001 (two-tailed test)

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